

Casa Amesti
516 Polk Street, Monterey
Monterey County, California

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
1000 Geary Street
San Francisco, California

PHOTOGRAPH-DATA BOOK REPORT
HISTORIC BUILDING SURVEY

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CASA AMESTI

Monterey, Monterey County, California

ADDRESS 516 Polk Street, Monterey, California
OWNER National Trust for Historic Preservation
OCCUPANT Old Capitol Club
USE Private Club Rooms and House Museum

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

While no specific events of history are connected with the Amesti adobe, the building as it stands is a significant monument recording a typical Monterey two-story town house of the Mexican capitol of Alta California and of the transitional period of the development of the town into an American community.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Physical History The original owner of the property was Don Jose Amesti, a Spanish Basque from Catalonia. Amesti came to Monterey in 1822 and in 1824 married Prudenciana Vallejo, daughter of Don Ignacio Vicente Ferrer Vallejo. Don Jose Amesti, an even tempered man gained respect and considerable financial standing in the Monterey community. He also owned Rancho de las Corralitos in the eastern part of Santa Cruz County, the site of lumbering activity as early as 1835. In August of 1833 it is recorded in the Register of the City of Monterey that the ayuntamiento (town government) had granted to Jose Amesti a solar (building site) thirty varas (approximately an English yard) in each direction. In February of 1834 in the same register it is recorded that Prudenciana Vallejo de Amesti was granted a solar of forty varas in each direction

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adjoining and broadside to that of Juan Cooper on which she had constructed a house. Knowing from the records of the town council that Prudenciana V. de Amesti had petitioned for a larger lot than the thirty vara piece granted to her husband the previous year established 1834 as the date of development of the property which is recorded in this survey.

At this writing it is impossible to establish the date when the house reached the form it has today. From letters, it is known to have been a two-storied adobe in 1855. It is likely that it was constructed as a one-story adobe with usable attic space, but from the spacing of the windows south of the stairhall and the existence of an interior stairway one is lead to conclude that the southern portion of the building is of later construction than 1834. An 1842 lithograph by Larkin shows the Amesti Adobe as a one and one-half story structure with 5 openings on the east wall ground story and 3 openings in the attic story without balcony. The Vallejo family was friendly with the foreigners of Mexican Monterey. Two daughters married men of English descent, (John Cooper and Jacob Leese) and were friends of the American Consul and merchant, Thomas Larkin. No doubt the mixture of American and Mexican ideas of construction account for the distinction of the colonial Monterey architecture. Leading examples of which are the Larkin House, the Cooper House and the Casa Amesti.

The additions and restoration work done by Frances Adler Elkins in 1919 did nothing to detract from the graciousness of this well preserved building. Casa Amesti remained in the Amesti family until sold to S. J. Duckworth in 1912, with subsequent purchase by Mr. and Mrs. Felton Elkins in 1918. Frances Elkins, a professional interior decorator, restored the structure and used it as a private residence, furnishing the house with fine examples of eighteenth and nineteenth century objects and furniture. It was bequeathed in this condition to the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1953. The building is maintained by a private club, the Old Capitol Club, and is open to the public on Fridays, 4 - 5 p.m. with a fifty cent admission charge.

Historical Events The house has no record of significant events pertaining to California history, but figured largely in the social activity of the Monterey community.

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Supplemental Material

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Vallejo Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California.

Vol. XV Protocolos de Instrumentos Publicos y Registros de Solares 1831-1849, Monterey County Archives, County Clerk's Office, Salinas, California.

Jeans, W. J., Architectural Remains of Old Monterey, Master of Arts Thesis, University of California, 1917, Berkeley, California.

Prepared by


KENNETH H. CARDWELL
Architect

September 1958

ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

General This two-storied balconied adobe is a handsome example of Mexican (Monterey) colonial architecture in an excellent state of repair. While the garden and some of the furnishings are not of a period contemporary with the structure, the taste of the last owner is shown everywhere to be in sympathy with the excellence of the architectural background.

Exterior The building is approximately forty-one and one-half feet wide and eighty-four feet long. And though it was not ascertained it is probably built on a rough stone foundation as was common in this area and which exists in the adjoining garden wall. The walls are load bearing sun-dried adobe bricks of general measurements of 11-1/2" by 24" by 4"

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thick where it was possible to check dimensions. However, inferring from the various thickness of measured walls it is possible there may be bricks of other sizes. All the exterior walls except the south were plastered with adobe plaster and whitewashed. The bond where visible is a common bond of alternate stretchers and headers. The south wall of the structure is of rough granite stones, probably erected at a late date, and is unusual in an area where it was common to use for stone wall construction a chalk rock which can be easily dressed with hand tools.

The front exterior terrace is brick but originally was wood plank and is protected by a cantilevered balcony of refined detail and proportion. The balcony is supported by 4" by 8" redwood beams plus or minus three feet on centers which have a 1/2" bead along each edge. The rear or west balcony is supported by two story redwood posts and the rail and post design is less refined than that of the front. Two brick chimneys now exist on the building though photographs taken in 1917 show as many as four.

There are two exterior doorways on the street elevation, probably both original constructions though at different dates. The doors in the openings were replaced in the 1919 restoration. All the second story openings open onto the balconies by means of french doors the upper half of which are glazed and fitted with interior wood shutters. The lower story windows are fitted with double hung redwood sash. These are protected by wrought iron grilles which were added in 1919.

The roof is a simple hip roof with the long sides extended in gable form to cover the exterior balconies. The front balcony has a simple wood cornice with dentils, while the rear has a plain flat fascia. Gutters on the building are modern replacements. The roof is now cedar shingles and earliest photographs show it shingled though the garden walls are crowned with tile.

Interior The plan of the building is a typical California adobe plan with room to room circulation. The upper story rooms all have access to exterior circulation. The Amesti adobe has an interior stairway rising from an entrance hall. This plan is unusual but exists in a portion

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which may date from after 1835, the date of construction of its neighbor the Larkin house. This house designed by Thomas O. Larkin for his New England wife about 1835 contains such an innovation.

The lower floors are concrete with hexagonal quarry tile in the entry and wood or linoleum in other areas and date from 1919. It was common in Monterey to find first story floors of a square medium burned tile about 12" square but there is no evidence of such now on the Amesti property. The principal rooms of the second story are floored with 2" by 12" redwood planking, described in letters written in 1855 as being polished to a high dark lustre. The walls are plastered with the splayed window jambs and flat heads lined with painted redwood boards. The ceilings of the first story are plastered. The ceilings of the second floor are random width 7" to 14" boards, painted. The second story ceiling joists are approximately 3" by 6" redwood beams three feet on center the ends of which show rough splitting though the faces are generally a sawn finish.

The trim throughout is redwood. The overmantle in the main room is an importation by Frances Elkins. The hardware has been replaced throughout the building. All lighting is of modern installation as is the central heating which at one time was serviced from the outbuildings along the south wall. These service buildings replaced earlier structures of undetermined use. However, on the south garden wall near the southwest corner of the house was the adobe oven portrayed in this photographic set.

Site The building placed to the front of the property is oriented with its long axis north and south giving the front elevation eastern exposure. This general orientation is typical of the major adobe residences in Monterey. The lot to the west and south of the structure is enclosed by a high adobe wall and is developed as a garden with service buildings. The service buildings and the garden were designed by the firm of Worth, Adler and Milleken, Architects, Chicago, Illinois and were executed in 1919. The headstone of Ramona McMahon near the west garden wall might well

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be an item collected by Mrs. Elkins. The total atmosphere of walled garden and house developed along the bounds of a city plot is extremely pleasant and worthy of study for schemes of urban living.

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